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Blake, (Sir) Francis, bart,
The House of Lords, the
People's charter, and the
Corn laws

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THE
HOUSE OF LORDS,

THE
PEOPLE'S CHARTER,

AND THE
CORN LAWS.

BY

SIR FRANCIS BLAKE, BART.

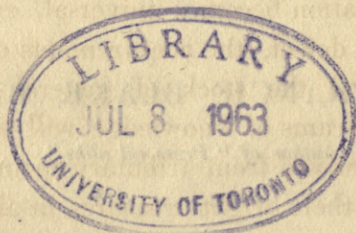
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PUBLIC OPINION is now exerting its moral influence in correcting and preventing the abuse of power, and is happily advancing in intelligence, consequently is increasing in strength, so that human forethought cannot calculate its immense and beneficial effects; time alone will imperceptibly and gradually bring them to light; for when education becomes universal, except in cases of natural defect, the acquirements of individuals will enlarge the stock of general information; thus the streams of knowledge will be perpetually flowing, derived from tributary springs, that will pour forth their bright treasures in aid of civilization, by means of discoveries of which the most scientific of the present generation can form no conception, for the resources of the human mind are as inexhaustible as the spirit that animates it is imperishable.

Whoever watches with an eye to future events the never-failing signs of times and circumstances, cannot be mistaken in forewarning the country of the near approach of an important change in the

political horizon ; for the industrious classes have already proclaimed the People's Charter, and led on, not by party, but by patriotism, are now concentrating their power to impress on Ministers the necessity there is for popularizing their measures on the true principle of the Constitution, that the Government was formed for the People, not the People for the Government.

There is, unfortunately, a proud feeling of superiority in the aristocracy, which ill accords with the popular spirit of a constitutional government. It has arisen from the possession of wealth, either hereditary or acquired, with or without titles, and has been a formidable obstacle to the improvement of the people ; thus a system of coercion instead of instruction was the general policy and faulty rule of successive governments, till it was at last put down by the enlightened influence of public opinion, which is now exercising a salutary control over the measures of government, and is the commencement of a new era in politics ; so that it is not by voluntary choice, but almost through necessity, as the alternative is revolution, that liberal principles are beginning to be adopted by the ruling powers. Yet the aristocracy still seem afraid to trust the people with power, lest it should lead to the overthrow of the Constitution ; instead of which the more probable result would be, that the extension of popular rights would give security to the Constitution, by interesting a larger proportion of people in its preservation. If then the aristocracy would have the people to place hope and

confidence in them, let the aristocracy set a liberal example by placing hope and confidence in the people.

Ministers either could not, or would not see danger in procrastinating, or, what is still worse, in pursuing a temporizing line of policy, which, while it disheartens their political friends, encourages and emboldens their opponents. If, on the contrary, they had made a determined stand against concession, and had trusted to popular support in repelling aggression against liberal measures, they would not have been baffled by the Tories, to whom they tacitly submit, not from the weakness of their cause, for if they were backed by the people they would be irresistible, but from a short-sighted policy in risking future danger for present ease. The Tories, no doubt, would be glad to receive them with open arms, if it would serve their own purposes; but then the Whigs, as a party, would never be able to rise again, for once down, it would be down with them for ever. Oh! what a contrast their late and present position presents; then, they were led on by the people, whose will it was the Reform Bill should be carried, and it was carried; now, they are left to themselves, humbled, powerless, helpless, even unable to advance the cause of reform one step without the permission of the Tories. If this were the end of reform, it would be lamentably bad; but it is only the first stage, and the prospect is cheering, for what is passed was aristocratic reform, the next will be popular reform.

What would be the effect of a coalition between

the Tories and the Whigs? Would it be the means of forming a stronger administration? On the contrary, a government thus constituted would be weaker, for public confidence would be entirely destroyed, since the system of reciprocity must be carried out to the extreme point, and principles must be frittered away to nothing before these two parties could act together. But who would be the real gainers? The people, for they would be ascending as the others would descend. If then the Tories, instead of coalescing with the Whigs, which would not be benefiting either party but injuring both, were to take at once a bolder and a decisive step, by displacing their opponents and then resume their former political position, relying solely on their own resources, would they be better off? Not much, for they would be quite at a loss how to carry on the government; since the contest is not now as formerly, between two aristocratic parties, the Whigs and the Tories, but between two opposite principles, the constitutional and the unconstitutional, the latter being the assumption of the supreme power by the aristocracy, who have no right to it. But is there no mode by which the Tories would be able to continue in office? None, unless they were to profit by the error the Whigs have committed, and wheel about to the popular side; then indeed, if their actions should prove them to be in earnest, their position would be tenable, otherwise hopeless. Is it likely however that the Tories would do so? Why not? for it is a fact they did so very lately, when the Roman Catholic

Relief Bill was introduced and passed under their auspices; therefore as it would not be the first time they have conquered their own prejudices, and reaped a golden harvest through the retention of their places, it is more than probable they would act in the same way again under similar circumstances, particularly as they would have less compunction than they had at first; for the Tories are wary, know well what they are about, how and when to give way even with a good grace. Expediency was their motto at that time, and as it admits of great latitude, it would be equally appropriate and accommodating on other occasions. The ultra Tories would be a little out of humour, but it would not last beyond the session, for they know better than to separate themselves from their party, as it would be not only giving advantages to the Whigs, but would be also acting against their own individual interests. What then would be the feelings of the Whigs, if their rivals the Tories were to get the start of them, and become the popular leaders of a constitutional monarchical government? Though the Whigs might affect to disregard popularity when they had the people with them, yet now they are left alone, they will soon find on reflection, how wrong they have acted in not having availed themselves of the commanding situation in which they were placed by the united voice of all Reformers; still it is to be hoped the error into which they have fallen will be a warning to them, and that before it is too late they will resume their own political station, by

uniting cordially with the people, to support Reform on the first great principle of constitutional government, that the supreme power belongs by right to the people.

The dangerous doctrine of final legislation cannot be too frequently denounced; for it is contrary to the enlightened principles of good government, and would inevitably lead to revolution, which would be the destruction of the Constitution. The institutions of the state have stood the test of centuries, but not without amendments, which is in favour of progressive reform; for as the alteration of times and circumstances gave rise to occasional judicious changes, it cannot be otherwise than right to follow that course, which has been proved to be of great benefit to the country. It is not however the name of king, or president, but it is the principle on which a government is conducted, that creates the real distinction between a constitutional monarchy and a republic, since both spring from the same source, which is from the voice of the people. Then, as they do not differ in their origin they ought not to differ in their principle; for the true principle of good government is equally inherent in a constitutional monarchy as it is in a republic, though it is less felt under the former than under the latter, which is a defect that exists to a great degree in our own constitution: yet it does not proceed from the monarchy, but from the hereditary construction of the House of Lords; for the monarchy is equally subject to the influence and domination of the aristocracy

as the people themselves are; therefore there is good ground for maintaining, that the great work of reform will be incomplete without a reform of the House of Lords.

It is not the executive government, nor the Lords, nor the Commons, but the People alone that give the tone to public opinion; therefore when the Lords obstruct measures that have popular sanction, setting up their own opinion against public opinion, the contest, though nominally with the government, is really with the people. If the constitution were not worth preserving, then indeed the surest way of hastening its downfall would be to resist a reform of the House of Lords, and rest the preservation of the constitution on the continuance of hereditary legislation. But the constitution is the work of successive ages, which clearly shows that final legislation is yet fortunately unknown in this country; therefore not to repair and improve the constitution would be contrary to all former practice. If then hereditary legislation were to give way to representation, it would attach responsibility to the House of Lords, and unite the three constitutional powers of the state under one and the same system; so that the springs of government would cease to be of an exclusive character, and would act uniformly for the general good of the nation; for the Lords would be coequal in power with the Crown and the Commons, but not superior, as they now are, though they ought not to be; from which superiority, however, they derive no real advan-

tage, but on the contrary are losing, instead of retaining, the confidence of the people.

The Lords must surely now begin to see that a change in the constitution of their House is inevitable; for though the people look at home to the defects in the representative system, it is clear the more the Commons are reformed, the greater will be the necessity for reforming the House of Lords; and though there may be a difference of opinion as to the cause that disturbs the constitution, there can be none as to the fact. Then as it is clear that the constitution does not work well, what ought to be done? The great mistake seems to be, that secondary causes are brought forward, and the primary one, which is the anomaly of hereditary and representative legislation, is overlooked; for the more this important point is examined with strict impartiality as to its several bearings, the stronger will be the impression that the working of two opposite principles, one against the other, is incompatible with the well-being of society, the safety of the state, and the preservation of the Constitution. Why then should there be any hesitation in correcting this evil, which paralyzes the government, and keeps the country in a state of constant agitation? It is indeed treating a civilized nation at least with great disrespect, that the mere accident of birth, or the favour of the Crown, should establish legislators in hereditary succession, without regard to their qualifications, or responsibility as to their actions; for the Lords claim, as their hereditary right, to do

just what they please, without being accountable to the people; which, though it is an established practice, is nevertheless disputed by the people; because, as the Crown has renounced the monstrous doctrine of divine right and passive obedience, and has been long amenable to constitutional responsibility, there is no good reason why the Lords should be greater in power than the Crown, by retaining a privilege as much at variance with the principle of a free Constitution, and as dangerous in its tendency, as that which the Crown was compelled to relinquish for the public good.

What prospect is there of an immediate reform of the House of Lords? None, according to present appearances; because the Tories consider the House of Lords as their own, since their principles not only predominate, but are also most active in that House; consequently, if the Tories should ever be induced to reform the House of Lords, it would not be an act of choice, but of necessity, by courtesy called expediency. The Whigs are too aristocratic in their principles and exclusive in their bearings to volunteer a reform of the House of Lords, particularly as they now retain office more through the forbearance of the Tories in not turning them out, than by the efforts of the Radicals to keep them in; therefore it is not to be expected, so long as the Whigs are upheld either by one party or the other, as their measures happen to be less or more liberal, that they can countenance a reform of the House of Lords when the Tories decidedly disapprove of it, and the

Radicals are for working out a complete reform of the Commons before they meddle with the Lords; as if the Lords would pass any bill, that by carrying reform to the Commons would necessarily lead to a change in the constitution of their own House, unless the popular pressure of public opinion should become so formidable as to threaten to leave them no other choice than revolution! Then, as it is certain there must be a strong pressure from without to regain possession of the main principle of the Reform Act, which is now withheld, though it never can be irrevocably lost, it would be saving time, and would be the wisest way, to direct that pressure at once against the Lords; for if the Lords were reformed, no other pressure would be required to carry reform wherever it is wanted.

The people demand as their rights, Universal Suffrage, Annual Parliaments, the Ballot, Equal Representation, Members without Property Qualification, and Paid Representatives; yet, however deserving of respectful attention these demands are, still it would be a great mistake to insist upon their immediate adoption, and to accept nothing less; for it is not reasonable to expect, that even the most liberal of the aristocracy could at once make up their minds to renounce predilections or prejudices, if they must be so called, in favour of settled customs, and revert to precedents drawn from less civilized times. It is however not unlikely that this public expression of popular feeling will be rather serviceable to the general cause of

Reform, if it be not acted upon in the spirit of dictation and compulsion that would give cause of umbrage to many good and true Reformers, but if it be discussed with temperance and moderation, so as to lead to conviction by the persuasive power of superior argument: for changes, that produce practical good, are not carried with precipitancy, but after mature deliberation, in weighing impartially both sides of the question. The people therefore ought to discountenance and disclaim the doctrine of physical force; for if it were resorted to and called into action, it would seriously injure the popular cause by retarding, instead of advancing, a system of good government; since it would alarm, not without reason, many Reformers, who would not mix themselves up with violent measures, that would be destructive of the peace and prosperity of the nation, and would have a tendency to overthrow the Constitution, revolutionize the government, and disorganize the empire; but who would otherwise take an active part in constitutional reform, based on the only safe and certain mode of attaining good government, which is through the powerful influence of public opinion.

The people lay claim to Universal Suffrage as a natural right; but they do not seem to have taken into consideration, that a constitutional government is an artificial state, on entering which, natural rights are exchanged for civil ones, under the implied condition that every class of the community should receive a corresponding benefit; thus natural rights are suspended when

social rights commence, the former merging in the latter; yet natural rights may be resumed, either wholly, or in part; but if entirely, it dissolves the civil compact. It cannot therefore be admitted that one class alone, however numerous that class may be, has a right in equity to set aside long established practices, introduce new ones, or revive obsolete ones, without consulting the interests of all concerned, and establishing on rational grounds that the proposed change would be generally beneficial. But it may be asked, how far will the aristocracy go? The Tory part, if they could have their own way, would rather retrograde than advance one step further; therefore no voluntary improvement in representation can be expected from them. The Whigs are not much more to be depended upon than the Tories, for they have committed themselves by making an egregious blunder, in mistaking the cause for the effect; for the Reform Act could never have been intended to be a final measure, but was supported by Reformers as the means to promote an end, which is good government; therefore, as the means are deficient, they ought to be improved until that end is accomplished. But on whom must reliance for ultimate success be placed? The people should rely on their own exertions, aided by that section of Reformers who are honestly devoted to their country's cause; for it is neither by servility to the government, nor to the people, that the good of the nation is promoted, but by upright intentions, in warning without

disguise both, of errors into which they are falling; the former by giving too little, the latter by asking too much. Then how far ought the aristocracy to go? The rights of the people ought to be respected, therefore the principle of Universal Suffrage, which would admit the right of voting without a property qualification, should be acted upon, so that the franchise would be within the reach of all who are qualified by education, good character, and a limited term of residence. Starting as the extension of the suffrage may be to the aristocracy, from having been taught to look at it with alarm and dread, yet, under the impression that Universal Suffrage is the point to which representation will come at last, it is only a question of time, whether it should be immediately or progressively introduced. The latter would be the preferable mode, because it would not be giving to the Constitution a sudden and violent shock, but would be enlarging the constituencies on a safe principle.

If the probable advantages, that might be derived from Annual Parliaments, could be calculated upon as equal to the disadvantages, then there would be ground for entertaining the proposition; but it is not so; on the contrary, the inconvenience that would be felt, would far exceed any good that would be likely to arise, if that period were fixed; for if elections were to come round so frequently, it would be keeping the country in a state of constant excitement, and would be depriving the constituencies of a reasonable and fair

trial of the merits or demerits of their respective Representatives: public business also would be impeded and retarded, by an annual influx of a large proportion of new members into the House of Commons. Yet seven years are far too long; and as one year would be too short, what is the best term, under all circumstances, for the duration of Parliament? Three years certain, neither more nor less, which would not be found too long nor too short, but would be a proper medium. Besides, if three years were fixed, it would not exceed the term to which parliaments might extend before the passing of the Septennial Act; therefore it would be reverting to a better constitutional practice, than the present one which supplanted it. Intermediate periods between three and seven years have been named, which is admitting that the term of seven years is too long; still an intermediate time would be an innovation; therefore it would be better at once to return to the triennial period, which would be accordant with constitutional practice.

There cannot be a stronger instance of the insufficiency of the Reform Act, than that the people themselves demand the Ballot, under the conviction that the franchise would then be of real value to its possessors, not in a pecuniary point of view, for if they meant to be accessible to a bribe, they would not petition for the Ballot, but that it may be in their power under its protection to give an honest vote, free from intimidation, according to the best of their judgment,

for the good of their country. This public declaration in favour of the Ballot is invaluable, as to the effects it will produce among the people, who are now rising in the scale of intellectual acquirements; and as their own interests are interwoven with the welfare of their country, it is to be hoped they will practically illustrate by their own example, the superiority of mental power over physical force. Henceforth, no one can be considered the friend of Reform who would resist the introduction of the Ballot, claimed as it is by the people, who, it must be allowed, are the best judges of its necessity; for he would be countenancing, at least indirectly, intimidation, bribery, and other corrupt practices, and thus would be frustrating the Reform Act, and giving to its principle an air of hypocrisy by substituting the shadow for the substance of Reform. For of what use is it to create a voter, unless he is protected in the fair exercise of his constitutional duty? That the weaker man ought not to be trampled upon by the stronger one, is the basis of good government; yet the Whig administration did not act upon this sound doctrine, when they divided with the Tories against the Ballot. Still the Tories did not deviate in this instance from their usual line of policy, which is opposition to the extension of popular rights; but the Whigs, who profess to be the friends of Reform, are inexcusable in resisting a measure that seems calculated beyond all others to further the progress of Reform, by guaranteeing to the

people, independence in the choice of their Representatives.

The equalization of constituencies, on the broad basis of electoral districts, would be a great improvement in the mode of representation, though it must be admitted it would be a sweeping change to break up the present representative system, and construct one on a new site; yet, as an ulterior measure it would be practicable; but certainly the Ballot, extension of the Suffrage, and shorter Parliaments are entitled to precedence, unless they could be all carried at the same time: still, should only one be attainable at present, that one ought to be the Ballot.

It seems at first view an illiberal distinction, that members must have a property qualification for a seat in the House of Commons, since it excludes many, who in every other respect are most eligible; yet, if members were admitted without a property qualification, it might alter the composition of the House of Commons, without any security that the change would be an improvement, so as to introduce a class of members more equal to the situation than might be chosen under the restriction of a qualification, if the Ballot were carried and the Suffrage extended; for, however objectionable a property qualification is in the abstract, yet it is less so when it is viewed in connection with the general interests of the country; for if members be not only independent in their principles, but also in their circumstances, it gives weight to

the proceedings of the House of Commons: therefore, as property is partly the criterion of independence, the retention of a qualification, though in its principle exclusive, is nevertheless advantageous, as it is instrumental in upholding the independence of the Commons. The people would surely prefer having their own House independent, than dependent. As then the removal of the qualification might have the effect of lessening the general independence, it is not advisable to destroy the principle of a qualification, though it may be to modify it, so as to render it less objectionable even to those who aim at removing it altogether.

If, however, the object of removing the qualification be to return members without property, and to tax the country for the services of the House of Commons, it would not only be wrong in principle, because it would be lowering the House of Commons by lessening their general independence, but furnishes an additional reason for retaining a qualification, since it is an admission, that members must have, from one source or other, an income sufficient for their maintenance, and the respectability of their situation; then, as there is no want of candidates, from whom could be selected a sufficient number of efficient members willing to serve without pay, why should the country be unnecessarily taxed? and why should those members be paid who have ample means without a salary? Yet, if they were not paid, when others without resources are paid, it would be creating an

invidious distinction between members, which is unknown at present; for whatever may be the difference of rank or fortune, all members are equal in the House of Commons; moreover, a seat in the House of Commons is at present an honourable object of ambition, but would cease to be so considered, if the country were taxed to pay members for their services.

It appears then, that the first cause of obstruction to good government rests with the Lords, and the secondary causes are with the Commons; the former being hereditary legislation, and the latter unprotected voting, exclusive suffrage, and the septennial act; the remedies for which four causes of obstruction are —

A Representative House of Lords.

The Ballot.

The principle of Universal Suffrage.

Triennial Parliaments.

Equal representation is too good not to be adopted if these four were carried. The removal of the property qualification and the payment of members, have no direct tendency to produce better government, for it does not follow they would be the means of introducing into the House of Commons members more independent in their principles, and more competent to fulfil their parliamentary duty with attention, zeal, and fidelity, than might be chosen without making these changes, if the other measures were carried. However, at any rate, these two points, as well as equal representation, are not of the same pressing importance as the pre-

ceding four, which must be obtained before good government can be had. It is not now a question whether the House of Lords should be reformed, for it will cease to exist as a legislative body unless it is reformed; therefore, every well-wisher to his country should make common cause in carrying reform to the House of Lords, by substituting representation for hereditary legislation, and thus not only save the House of Lords from falling, but also preserve the Constitution. If, however, the Lords, by continuing to oppose public opinion, should lead to the downfall of the Constitution, it will be as much their own fault as it was King James the Second's when he lost his crown through his infatuation in setting up and endeavouring to maintain his own opinion against the national feeling.

Another subject in which the people are most deeply interested holds a prominent part in the agitation of the day; it is the question of the Corn Laws, which strike at the commercial prosperity of the country, and if not repealed will make an inroad on social order. It is indeed a very important question, for it involves every interest either more or less, and proves that the principle of legislation is not sound when it is exclusive; for if the feelings of the people had been consulted, there would have been no Corn Laws to obstruct the general diffusion of the bounty of Divine Providence, and thus create an artificial scarcity in the supply of the first necessary of life. The land-

owners however apprehend it would be injurious to themselves if the Corn Laws were repealed, therefore they are for retaining a restrictive duty on the importation of corn, without regard to the effect it has on the general interest of the whole community; but if the other interests were sacrificed for the benefit of the land-owners, what would become of the landed interest? It would not be able to withstand the general shock, and all would be involved in one common ruin.

It is true, if the Corn Laws were repealed, the price of corn would necessarily fall; yet it would be counteracted in some degree by the rise that would be likely to take place on the Continent, so that the two extremes of price would meet by an ascending as well as a descending scale; and when the merchant's profit on the corn imported and the expenses of freight are added to the prime cost of foreign corn, there is good reason to expect that the produce of land at home would continue to bring a remunerating price to the owners. Excessive fluctuations cause uncertain profit, so that instead of agriculture being a safe investment for capital, it has become a hazardous speculation; on the contrary, steady prices, which would be attainable by a free trade in corn, would produce fair profit, and would be a security against loss. But if it could be proved that the landed interest is burdened with a rate of taxation beyond what would be its proportionate share, then it should be equalized, so as not to bear more heavily on that interest than on others; but land-owners should

have more spirit than to take their equivalent from the hard earnings of the working classes, either by a fixed or any other restrictive duty on the importation of corn.

In claiming the repeal of the Corn Laws, there seems now to be every disposition to act with perfect fairness towards the landed interest; for the principle of free trade is not directed against agriculture alone, but has been recognized in its fullest extent by the renunciation of all claims to protection on home manufactures. Surely this is an earnest of an honourable feeling; for it makes no distinction of interests, but places all impartially on the same footing, therefore it ought to be responded to at once by the landed interest with equal candour and reciprocal good feeling; for its value consists in not being, like the half measures of petty legislation, based on self-interest, but on being a full and complete measure, on the excellent principle of equal justice to all parties.

The working-classes view with great distrust the present agitation for the repeal of the Corn Laws, under the impression that it has been got up for the sinister purpose of diverting public attention from the People's Charter, which contains within itself the means of correcting all the abuses of exclusive legislation; but this suspicion is not borne out by fair reasoning on the case, since the manufacturers are the prime movers of this agitation; and it cannot be mistaken, that their real motive springs from their inability, in consequence of excessive taxation, to compete with foreign

manufacturers in neutral markets; for though great stress is laid on the increase of exports, it tells the wrong way, since it arises from the export of raw materials instead of manufactured articles; then, as it makes a great difference in the comforts of the working-classes whether the price of bread is high or low, and as there is no tax, the repeal of which would benefit them so directly as the removal of the restrictive duties on the importation of corn, the manufacturers, in seeking for the repeal of the Corn Laws, are trying to effect an object, which would be equally beneficial to the working-classes as to themselves. But the Chartists are standing in their own light; for if, instead of not supporting the Corn Law agitation, they were cordially to unite with the Abolitionists, they would be far more likely to gain an accession of strength in favour of the measures they themselves are advocating, than by calling in question the motives of others; therefore, instead of giving way to excited feelings, which may have arisen from mistaken appearances, they should urge, by all legitimate means, the total and immediate repeal of the Corn Laws, which would be promoting the interests of themselves and their families, and at the same time would be acting on the true principles of sound policy, humanity, justice, and religion.

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